

My Memories of Reg Park

Joe Weider

Reg Park was born in Leeds, England in 1928, and by his early twenties he had become not only the greatest bodybuilder to have come from Great Britain but also one of the greatest of all time. What's more, Reg was the primary role model for history's most famous bodybuilder—Arnold himself—who happily tells anyone within earshot that when he decided to become a competitive bodybuilder, the man he most wanted to look like was big Reg Park. In any case, I'm happy to say that I was there when Reg's fame exploded and that I was able to play a role in his success. I hasten to add that Reg helped me, too; his rock-hard, massive body provided me with photographic opportunities that pushed the sales of my magazines to record heights in the early Fifties. I think—and I believe Reg would have agreed—that back in those days the two of us had what biologists call a “symbiotic” relationship, which simply means that we each brought something to the table and helped one another.

Reg's beginnings, as is the case with many bodybuilders, were somewhat modest, although he was anything but the sickly, weak youth we so often read about who supposedly only became strong and physically developed when he began lifting weights. As a child, Reg was larger than most of his schoolmates and he loved sports, particularly active ones like soccer and rugby. Even so, he always wanted to be even larger than he was. He was quite tall for his age, but he yearned for more mass—more bulk. Finally, when he was in his late teens, he stumbled upon the secret, and I remember him telling me about it in one of the earliest interviews I did with him for our magazines. He said that, “I was 17 when one day, visiting a swimming pool in London, I was struck by the impressive physique of Dave Cohen, a bodybuilder of considerable reputation, and one I soon learned had a whole-hearted and unselfish interest in the sport. I walked over and spoke to him, and we immediately became fast friends. It is to Dave that I give full credit for my start in weight training. I trained with him and made swell gains for almost a year.” Unfortunately, the training of these two young men was interrupted by

world events, and they were swept up in the maelstrom of World War II. Reg, like so many of his countrymen, joined the service as soon as he was 18 and served as a physical training director stationed in Malaya. He returned home in 1948 just in time to travel to London to see John Grimek win the Mr. Universe contest and John Davis win the gold medal in the heavyweight division in weightlifting at the Olympic Games.

Reg was very impressed by John Davis—considered at that time to be the strongest man in the world—and by all the other great lifters, but he told me that nothing matched the dramatic effect John Grimek's herculean development and masterful posing had on his impressionable mind. Reg was young and didn't fully realize it, but John Grimek had a body and the ability to display it that was beyond that of any other man in history, up to that point. Although Grimek was by then 38 years old he still trained with real passion and was still in his prime. We have to remember that in 1948 there were almost no other men in the world with muscular development and posing ability that came anywhere close to his. Bodybuilders were still rare creatures, and the impact of the amazingly thick, yet graceful Grimek was—for people from that era—almost like seeing someone from another planet. But Reg beheld Grimek in all his masculine glory and later told me that, “All my old enthusiasm returned and I trained like I had never trained before . . . soon after, I won the Mr. Britain title. I then came to America . . . the trip being a gift to me from my parents.”

Reg, who was an only child, maintains that he had “the most wonderful parents in the world.” He says that they both encouraged him in his training from the very beginning, adding that as much as his father backed him, his mother was even stauncher in her support. He told me that “she was the one who saw to it that I had plenty of sleep, lots of wholesome food and time to train. I remember when I practiced my first ‘bench’ press that I used a rather weak box to lie on and that it gave way and the weight came right down on my nose. My mother strapped it up like a professional and thanks to her I

still have a good nose.”

As young Reg trained, his naturally large bone structure combined with his fierce dedication to the hard work the training demanded resulted in rapid gains in size and strength. Soon the teenaged girls in his neighborhood began to notice the muscles sprouting over Reg’s ample frame, and they began to drop by to watch him pump up. Leeds is a relatively small city, and so most of the young people his age knew one another. Accordingly, as he grew, so did his local fame. He once told me with a smile and chuckle that, “I did get a lot of ambition to use really heavy weights when the girls

came around to see me train. You might say they inspired me to new heights. And I do think it’s a good idea to have others watch you as you train—and what could be better than a group of pretty girls?” Even at a young age, however, Reg was always drawn to girls who were interested in being fit and healthy—not just to girls who took their youthful beauty for granted. He told me on his first trip to the U.S. that he had always felt that way, adding that, “I’m a healthy young man and I like energetic, fun-loving girls of all sorts, but I especially like girls who are shapely. But I know I’d never be happy with a girl for long if she didn’t have a good personality and an interest in self-improvement and health. I’d certainly never marry a girl who wasn’t healthy and fit, and willing to stay that way. I’m not so young that I don’t realize how quickly good looks can fade, but good health is a thing that can be maintained for years and years if you take care of yourself. I know that physical culture will always be a part of my life, and I want a wife who feels the same way.” As things turned out, Reg got his wish, as he later married Mareon Isaacs, a professional dancer who, as a consequence, had a terrific figure and a love of exercise. Their son, Jon-Jon, followed his dad’s footsteps and eventually moved to California where he operates a personal training facility in the Los



Reg Park is flanked by his parents in this photograph taken in 1951 during a visit with Joe Weider (second from left) in London for the Mr. Universe contest. Charles A. Smith, one of Weider’s writers, is on the far left.

Angeles area.

After Reg graduated from high school in Leeds, and following his two-year hitch in the service of his country, he enrolled in a local business college and took a two-year diploma in Business Administration. Even then, he was ambitious and had hopes of one day opening his own business in some aspect of physical culture. As always, his parents fully supported him in his efforts and aspirations. One thing that’s little known and appreciated in the United States, especially more than 60 years after the fact, is that the food rationing in Great Britain during World War II didn’t end when the Germans sued for peace. Rationing continued for some years, and this makes the muscular development Reg was able to achieve in such conditions all the more remarkable. Protein, in particular, was in short supply for years—years that coincided with Reg’s formative period of training. He did the best he could, of course, which because of his wonderful family was much better than most, but he told me when we met that he had been hungry for years and was still hungry. And I certainly watched with amazement at the way he devoured steaks, chops, and any type of meat. The first thing he said when he got off the plane and took his first steps on American soil was, “I’d really love to have a big steak and then take a workout at Abe

Goldberg's Gym." So we fed him, and I took almost as much pleasure as he did as he plowed through his huge meal. I'm not suggesting that Reg ate in a boorish or uncivilized way, because he has always been a perfect gentleman in his behavior. I'm just trying to convey how easy it was to imagine the privations of war just by watching the keen pleasure he took as he savored that big New York Strip. It was his first steak in over five years.

I supported him during his first trip to the States, as I was anxious to see what this *wunderkind* my brother Ben had told me about could do with modern equipment and adequate food. I still remember how ready Reg always was, when the noon hour arrived, to go to Dom Juliano's home and fill up on the delicious Italian meals Dom's mother served to Reg and her son. His favorite food was veal chops, and he often ate three, along with multiple servings of vegetables and pasta. I told him that he should up his daily protein intake by at least 200 grams a day, and get his carbohydrates from the most nutritious foods. He followed my advice with a grateful smile. Some months later, on a swing through Florida to spend some time with Dr. Frederick Tilney, Tilney saw him in action and sent in this report, "It's something to see this Herculean Giant sitting at the dining table, wearing only trunks, doing full justice to huge steaks, legs of lamb, roast chickens, roast beef, plus all that goes with them. He EATS! You can't build the kind of muscular development he has unless you do eat—and substantially, too."

Another thing besides his ravenous hunger and limitless potential that set Reg apart when he arrived in the United States was that he was totally unfamiliar with many of the training devices we took for granted. He had never had regular access to a leg press machine or a lat machine, for example, or an incline bench or squat rack. He had read of these things, and seen them in the magazines, but he had never had a chance to really use them. We have to realize that this was many decades ago—back in the day when almost everyone in both Great Britain and North America believed that weight training was bad for you and should be avoided at all costs. As hard as it is to believe, when Reg came to the U.S. in 1950 for the first time there were only six weight training gyms in England. Six. Think about that. In any event, he was like a hungry child in a candy store when he first saw Abe Goldberg's great gym with all its equipment, as it was the most modern gym in the city at that

time. Reg overdid it on the first day, of course, and was duly sore, but he quickly got into the swing of things under the tutelage of Dom Juliano, Abe, and Marvin Eder, who absolutely amazed Reg with his strength, as Marvin amazed everyone else.

I want to back up a few weeks now and return to the second day of Reg's first visit to North America. After his big steak and overzealous workout, Reg got a good night's rest and was ready for whatever came. First, I took him to see Sig Klein's legendary gym in downtown Manhattan, and as soon as Sig got a good look at the burly Briton he said, "My God, you must be the guy Grimek's been telling me about." Sig proudly showed his visitor around the studio, and Reg was properly impressed by the antique but very usable old barbells and dumbbells that filled Sig's studio, as well as by the marvelous photographs of the greats of the past; the oil painting of Professor Attila, Sig's late father-in-law and the man who taught Sandow how to be a stage strongman; and by Sig's matchless collection of antique beer steins depicting scenes of weightlifting in Germany and Austria. After this very pleasant visit, we went next to the studio of Lon Hanagan, one of the top physique photographers in the world, so that Lon could capture for posterity the amazing muscles Reg had been able to build with only the primitive equipment and rationed food available to him in England. Barton Horvath, a respected bodybuilder in his own right, was writing for me at that time and I had asked him to meet us at Lon's studio so he could interview Reg. Clearly, Reg made a powerful first impression on Barton.

My first impression of him was his hugeness. Standing 6'1" in his stocking feet and weighing 225 pounds of solid muscle, in clothes he was one of the most impressive figures I had ever seen. From tip to tip his shoulders measure more than 24" across. Clothed, as he was, with jacket and topcoat, his shoulder span must have been about 30"—and that's some spread. His column-like neck also drew my attention. A size 19 shirt fitted snugly . . . As he took off his shirt my eyes bulged. His trapezius development was absolutely the most massive I had ever seen. The undershirt was next, revealing a 51" normal chest,

shoulders round as grapefruits, pectorals the size of half of a football, upper arms that swell the tape to well over 18", and all this tapering down to a perfectly muscled, 31" waist . . . After Reg donned a pair of posing trunks the perfect modeling of his full, round thighs and shapely calves could also be seen.

During the photo session we learned, remarkably enough, that Reg was not in top shape because he had only been able to do sporadic training during the month prior to departing for the U.S. This news, coupled with the giant standing before us, made us all realize—me, Lon, and Barton—that we were fortunate to be in the presence of the sort of man who only comes along once in a very great while. We were extremely proud to witness the launching of a career that we believed would reach the very pinnacle of the bodybuilding world. Reg was so large, so shapely, so young, and so relatively inexperienced that all three of us old hands saw him for what he was—a great big diamond-hard diamond in the rough. Ben had told us that with Reg's height and great breadth of bone he was truly unusual, but that he had to be seen in person to be fully appreciated. The photographs resulting from that first shoot with Lon and later ones that were taken in Florida by Russ Warner created a sensation in my magazines and made Reg an instant celebrity. Fans everywhere were hungry for more and always more about this young colossus, and I did my best to satisfy their appetites. I even commissioned Reg to write a series of articles in which he would outline his training methods, body part by body part, and this series proved to be one of the most popular we had ever run.

By the time Reg left for home after being in North America for several months he was great friends with a lot of the people in "The Gang"—people like Marvin Eder, Dom Juliano, Barton Horvath, Charles A. Smith, Dr. Frederick Tilney, and—I think I can safely say—myself. By the time he left, Reg and I had become training partners while he was in New Jersey and I wasn't away on business. I like to think I showed him a few things, and I certainly know that I benefitted at least as much by trading set for set with such a prodigy of muscle, even though I used less weight. I was just in my early thirties myself, and I was anxious to build as much muscle and strength as possible. I realized, of course, that just as nature had made Reg almost four inches taller

than I was, nature had also provided him with a larger bone structure and a greater capacity for developing lean mass, so I was a little jealous of him. The main feeling I had about Reg, however, was pride—pride that weight training, the activity I loved and promoted and through which I made my living—could produce so godlike a man at such a young age. Through the living example of Reg in the flesh I could see more clearly into the future—a future that would produce men whose development would equal and even surpass the level Reg had reached. For me, Reg was like a window to the world that lay ahead for bodybuilding, and I was extremely grateful to have such a man working for me, representing my company, and helping me to advance the cause of physical culture.

Later that same year, I convinced Reg to enter the NABBA Mr. Universe contest in London, and young as he was I expected him to win easily. I had seen Steve Reeves a few months before the contest, and because of his interest in acting he was so slender that I didn't even think he could pack on enough lean bodyweight by the time of the contest to be a major factor. Actually, because of how Steve looked, I didn't even think he would enter the Mr. Universe contest. But to the amazement of almost everyone, Steve demonstrated such a fierce desire to win the event that he managed to gain over 30 pounds of solid muscle and eke out a victory over Reg. To be honest, there was little to choose between them, and both were splendid representatives of the Iron Game at its best. The following year, however, I knew no one could stand against Reg in London as he was even larger and more muscular than he had been the year before. One of the reasons for my certainty was that prior to the contest he spent a good deal of time in New Jersey and once again we worked out together. So I was able to witness his dedication and obsession up close, and to see how that dedication and obsession pushed his body to higher levels of development. As he and I trained in the run-up to the 1951 Mr. Universe contest I decided that just as I was training with him I'd make the trip with him to London and enter the contest myself. I knew I had no chance to beat Reg, of course, or to beat the other top bodybuilders who would be competing, but I wanted to show solidarity with Reg, for whom I had real affection. I also wanted the readers of my magazines to know that I practiced what I preached. Some of my competitors had occasionally accused me of not being willing to let people know how I really looked,

implying that I was all talk and no action—that I had no real strength or muscle size.

Thus it was that Reg and I went to London to compete in the contest that was then widely acknowledged to be the best run and most fairly judged bodybuilding event in the world. In fact, as my brother, Ben, and I built the International Federation of Bodybuilders we tried to pattern the way we ran our main contests after the NABBA Mr. Universe contest. To cover the contest, I assigned one of my best writers, Charles A. Smith, an Englishman who was then living in New Jersey and helping me with my magazines. The Mr. Universe contest was divided into three height categories, and Reg and I were both in the tallest, which was for men of 5'9" or above. This is how Charles described how eagerly Reg's countrymen had awaited his turn on the stage and how Reg looked when he finally appeared.

When Reg Park appeared the audience went wild. No words I can make use of could remotely describe this man's musculature. It is almost a year since I last saw him and his progress in that period has been nothing short of remarkable. His arms are huge. His deltoids are huge. His legs are huge. In fact, every individual part of his physique is terrific and yet blended with it is a shapeliness and definition that makes his development so outstanding. At no other period in weightlifting history has there been a man with such a wonderful combination of shape, size, definition and strength. The boy has everything. Even hardened officials gasped with amazement when Reg, slowly turning his back to the crowded auditorium exhibited his stupendous back, arms and deltoids. For my part, I have never seen anything to equal it.

When my turn finally came I did my best to remain calm and stepped out onto the platform to be judged by not only the officials but also by the practiced eye of the knowledgeable audience of physical culturists who had come from around the country and the world to see the sport's premier event. To the surprise of absolutely no one, I did not win and Reg was crowned Mr. Universe. When Reg's name was called, the crowd

went wild.

Reg then moved into the next stage of what proved to be a very exciting, eventful, and influential life. Prior to the Mr. Universe, he and I had worked out an agreement that would allow Reg and his father to be the primary distributors of Weider products in Great Britain through the Reg Park Equipment Company. Shortly after, he began *The Reg Park Journal*, a small but well-done bodybuilding magazine published in Leeds which ran from 1952 to 1959.

Following his victory in the Mr. Universe contest, Reg found himself the victim of what some have called the "Grimek Curse." The name resulted from the fact that after John Grimek won the Mr. America contest twice he was judged to be so superior to all other men that a rule was passed by the Amateur Athletic Union stating that anyone who had won the Mr. America crown was forever banned from entering the contest again. And even though the NABBA Mr. Universe never formally passed such a law, it was followed by that group more or less *de facto*. So Reg found himself somewhat at sea as far as competitive bodybuilding was concerned. He still trained hard, of course, as he truly loved the weights, and he stayed busy giving exhibitions all over the country. He made about £25 a show, which was a decent sum as £25 in 1951 would translate into approximately \$1200 today. And for the larger shows he got £50, or almost \$2500. Reg had always been unusually strong, and as he trained his strength continued to increase. By 1953 he was one of only two men who could bench press 500 pounds, the other being Doug Hepburn, the 290 pound Canadian Samson who won the World Weightlifting Championship in 1953. Reg could also do multiple reps in the squat with 600 pounds, press 300 pounds behind the neck, and do reps in the curl with 230 pounds with very little body movement. I know these figures are accurate, and not inflated like so many of the claims some bodybuilders have made about their strength. Reg was a genuinely large man with large muscles and a large appetite for strength, and he put in the work he needed to fully un-wrap his rare natural gifts.

Reg also did a bit of professional wrestling, but the pay in England back in the mid-1950s wasn't anything like it is in these days of weekly TV airings and huge Pay-Per-View bouts. Because of his name the promoters started out paying him well, but that rapidly moved down by 50% and then another 50%, and soon he was making less than he could make doing exhibitions. So he "packed it in," as the Brits would say. By 1958 his

wife, Mareon, had developed spots on her lungs and both of his young children were also experiencing health problems, so they decided to move to what they hoped would be a healthier climate. They considered Hawaii and California, but as his wife was from South Africa and had family there, they decided to move to Johannesburg and open a health club. Always a thoughtful man, Reg realized that it had been seven years since he had won the Mr. Universe contest and that, as a result, the level of his fame had considerably diminished. But another win at the NABBA Mr. Universe contest, he reasoned, would set him up well for a triumphant arrival in South Africa with all the bells and whistles he'd need to insure the success of his gym. He actually made this decision less than a month prior to the 1958 contest, but when he sent in his entry it was accepted and he went on to become the first man to win the NABBA Mr. Universe twice.

Reg's gym in Johannesburg was an immediate success, his wife and children flourished there, and he made his home there for almost 50 years. But the drama of his life had another major act to go before he could settle into the comfortable life of a successful gym owner and bodybuilding legend. Much of that act was thanks to his old friend and bodybuilding rival, Steve Reeves, who by 1959 had become an international film star in the Hercules movies. Beginning in 1960, quite a few other bodybuilders had cashed in on the "Sword and Sandal" film craze, and it was only a matter of time before Reg got a call asking him to come to Italy and star in a film. The call came from a producer who sent a first class roundtrip ticket and guaranteed expenses, and Reg duly arrived in Rome in late December of 1960. The film, in which he also portrayed the mythical hero Hercules, was quite successful and he went on to make four more over the next several years. It's interesting to compare Reg with Steve in their separate film roles as Hercules. Steve was the first to portray the hero, and his early films were such enormous successes that his later movies had somewhat higher production values than the ones starring Reg. But the bodybuilders of the world much preferred



This 1959 snapshot displays the rugged massiveness Reg had built through his hard training back in the pre-steroid era.

Reg's version of Hercules because he didn't drop 20 or 30 pounds of muscle to make the films as Steve had been required to do. Even without that difference, Reg was the larger man. Reg made the films weighing at least 230 pounds and, on the big screen, he looked absolutely enormous. Steve would have looked larger too, of course, had he not been bullied into losing weight by the producers and directors of his films. In any case, although those of us who were bodybuilders back in the late Fifties and early Sixties went to see every Steve Reeves film we possibly could, we were even more anxious to see Reg because he looked the way, in our heart of hearts, we knew the "real" Hercules must have looked.

Reg continued to train regularly, to look impressive, and to attend some of the major bodybuilding events throughout his long life and into his mid-seventies. Until he was overwhelmed by cancer, Reg was the picture of manly health. He had a wonderful life in physical culture, and his early photographs continue to inspire young bodybuilders all over the world. The word "legend" is often overused, but it is a word that fits Reg like the tailor-made suits he always had to have made to cover his massive frame.

It is significant, I think, that the sadness which overwhelmed the Iron Game last November when word arrived that Reg had died was so universal. The sadness was universal because his wide fame was the result of a combination of his strength, his peerless physique, his physical power, his film work, and his exceptional character. He was also the last bodybuilding legend to have reached his peak before the appearance of anabolic steroids. Because of this coincidence—and because Reg's strength and size were so extraordinary—he should serve as an example to young bodybuilders who are wrestling with the question of whether to take the anabolic shortcut or the hard road less travelled by. This is a question each man must answer for himself, but a young man could do worse than to choose the old-fashioned way and follow in the footsteps of the late, but unquestionably great, Reg Park.